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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000194

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SUBJECT: UN SEES LOOMING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN BURMA

REF: RANGOON 71

Classified By: COM CARMEN MARTINEZ FOR REASONS 1.5 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: The UN country team in Burma has painted a stark picture of the nation's humanitarian situation. It has also forecast dire consequences for Burma's poor, and for regional stability, if the situation is not addressed quickly. The UNDP Resident Representative in Rangoon will present the country team's findings during the upcoming Tokyo meetings. Resolution of these problems, and the prevention of a full-blown crisis, depend first and foremost on a more responsible and responsive government. However, there are ways to make marginal improvements and to perhaps delay the onset of crisis. As it has with the fight against HIV/AIDS here, the U.S. government should consider contributing to this effort. End summary.

Humanitarian Crisis in the Making

12. (C) During the upcoming Tokyo meetings on Burma, the UNDP Resident Representative in Rangoon plans to deliver a dire assessment of the humanitarian situation facing Burma. The assessment stems from a recently completed UN report entitled "A Review of the Humanitarian Situation in Myanmar." According to the report, Burma's persistent consumer price inflation (estimated by the Embassy at about 60 percent in 2002, with higher levels for key staples), combined with the serious erosion of basic social services (for example, the GOB has budgeted only \$25,000 for fighting HIV/AIDS), have put the country's poorest people on the precipice of disaster. The UN report is the first of two volumes; the second will include some "quick impact" project proposals and go into the country-specific problems of delivering and monitoring humanitarian assistance in Burma.

13. (C) The results of the malignant combination of inflation and poor social services, according to the report, are increasing poverty, landlessness, food insecurity, spreading disease (especially TB, malaria, and HIV), and a deterioration in the country's education system. These factors are not felt equally across the country, hitting particularly hard ethnic minorities residing in remote border areas and peri-urban slum dwellers. The report recognizes rapidly expanding disparities between urban, peri-urban, and rural populations.

14. (C) The report also stresses how symptoms combine to exacerbate the situation. Some examples: malnutrition and poor food security hamper people's ability to fight disease and thus earn income; poor access to clean water leads to high child and infant mortality; and, a weak education system undermines a country's economic strength.

15. (C) The UN points out that the impact of Burma's accelerating humanitarian crisis is also felt well beyond the country's borders. It is very disruptive to regional stability, and a major obstacle to the international community's efforts to combat trafficking in persons, HIV/AIDS, and other social plagues. In particular, the report illustrates in detail the connection between poverty, malnutrition, and slipping educational standards, on the one hand, and narcotics production and use, the AIDS epidemic, prostitution, and trafficking in persons.

Who's to Blame?

6 (C) The report gives the SPDC the credit and blame it deserves. The UN is justifiably concerned with being too harsh on the GOB, but realizes the importance of giving a relatively frank assessment to those assembled in Tokyo. According to one UN official here, there was much discussion in the UN country team regarding how far to go in each direction. Apparently there was concern that traditional opponents of the SPDC would use overwhelming criticism of the regime as further justification for withholding any international assistance that might be used to "bail the government out" of its predicament.

17. (C) Nonetheless, the final UN report seems to have struck

a good balance. The GOB gets credit for improvement of water and sanitation facilities, construction of schools, improving stability in border regions via ceasefire accords, and reducing opium cultivation. However, the UN makes it clear that the GOB's actions have not done enough -- for example pointing out the lack of well-trained teachers to staff the new schools. In addition, the report, while not specifically mentioning the SPDC, asserts that "humanitarian issues...are often an extension of...weaknesses in the policy framework, stability, peace and security, the macro-economic environment, level and quality of social services, civil society participation, and transparency and accountability."

How to Stop the Slide

18. (C) The UN report's prescription is very straightforward: find a way to meet the needs of the people. This should be the first priority for all parties, inside and outside of Burma, interested in the future of the country. The report correctly points out that simply ignoring the gorilla in the room will not make it go away. In fact, this policy of neglect will only lead to increased regional tensions, "vulnerability and social instability."

Comment

19. (C) We agree with the UN's assessment, and its blame for the situation. In particular, the UN's outline of areas of concern is right on target. Continuing to ignore the multitude of very serious social ills in Burma will doom it to an ill-fed, under-educated, and unhealthy generation -- the generation that could well be called on to rebuild a democratic nation. Admittedly, these problems cannot be completely resolved unless the current regime changes its priorities. While the international community cannot carry the entire burden in the interim, it can certainly contribute to some incremental improvements. As U.S. AID has found with its nascent HIV/AIDS program in Burma, there are international NGOs that are able to work quite independently of the current regime in areas of critical humanitarian need. Martinez